

# Research shows child welfare social workers lack consistency when helping at-risk children

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University of Otago research has found that consistency is lacking when helping at-risk children. Credit: University of Otago

Differing perceptions of risk among child welfare social workers is leading to inconsistent outcomes for children in need, a University of

Otago-led study reveals.

Lead author, Senior Lecturer in Social Work Dr. Emily Keddell, says children in similar circumstances can receive variable interventions or decisions from [child welfare](#) services because of social workers' different perceptions of risk, safety and future harm.

In a study, recently published in Children and Youth Services Review, data was gathered via an online survey, which was used to develop interviews and focus groups for a second phase of the study.

The findings reveal that, despite similar knowledge bases, child welfare social workers in non-government organisations and the statutory child protection sector observe [children](#) in similar circumstances differently.

For example both groups view the presence of domestic violence as a risk, but don't view it as equally serious.

"Children who are in similar circumstances should get equitable access to service provision, or legal intervention, in a manner that reflects their level of need compared to others," Dr. Keddell says.

Some of these differences are understandable, as non-government child welfare [social work](#) emphasises early intervention, while statutory child protection practice focusses more on judging when statutory thresholds are reached.

"However, ensuring that perceptions of risk are aligned is important if the aim is a child welfare system where professionals working at every level of it can work collaboratively with families in a consistent manner."

Dr. Keddell believes continuing inter-professional education that grapples meaningfully with practise examples may be useful in order to

develop a greater consensus among professionals about family risk and need.

She also believes more attention needs to be paid to the resourcing of both non-government and statutory child welfare.

"Divisions between the two areas of practise are heightened when neither is well-resourced," she says.

This can lead to families becoming "hot potatoes", passed back and forth between the two types of agency, too high risk for the non-government sector, but not perceived as high risk enough for the statutory sector.

"This can contribute to lack of service provision to struggling families, as well as decreasing trust between different types of [child welfare](#) social workers."

**More information:** Emily Keddell et al. Role type, risk perceptions and judgements in child welfare: A mixed methods vignette study, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.02.017](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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